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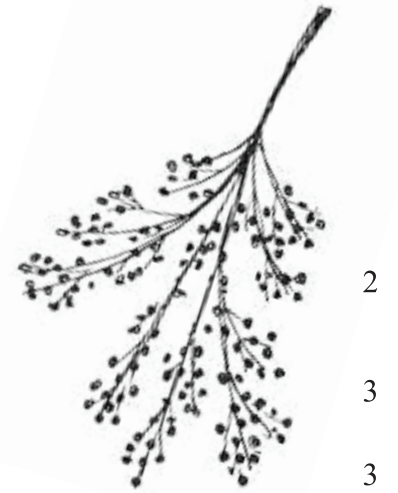


Cover by Vidhipssa Mohan

White Noise

English Department Newsletter 2015

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EDITORIAL



“So you just read books right? I do that all the time!”

“I loved writing essays! It must be so much fun for you because what you write is merely a spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions.”

One of the biggest misconceptions that prevails even today, is that people believe that the study of literature mostly involves creative writing. This is a greatly misrepresented picture of the department of English. Several students of the English department struggle to catch up with academic writing, during the course of the semester. The process becomes somewhat mechanical, as students comment upon ideologies and analyze texts within the vast syllabus. Our ink and graphite often translate into words that obey the formal structures of essays, usually with the intent to bring us the scores we expect, in examinations.

In contrast, the newsletter presents a different side of student writing. It represents words and pictures that exist beyond answer sheets. There is so much that is learned inside classrooms, through discussions, as we move closer to mastering the skill of written and verbal expression. And yet, the most insightful conversations that we have over a cup of iced tea in the chaupal (our very own symposium), go undocumented. We do not wear togas or fashion beards like the solemn-faced philosophers of the ancient times but that does not mean that there is nothing worthy of recording, in our dialogues. Debates about problematic protagonists in novels, the issue of imposed religiosity or why communities need feminism, are lost within the buzz of a myriad conversations. These voices that seem like white noise from afar, tend to be the most interesting opinions, when examined individually. This is precisely what White Noise aims to do – to allow the students a forum to express their ideas.

After a grueling session of selecting works, we are pleased to admit that responses to the call for contributions to this newsletter had been very prompt. What’s even more remarkable is the fact that there is a common undercurrent to most of the work we received. Whatever sphere it concerns, be it the right to love, the kind of books students read or how they identify with political movements, the dominant idea is about transgressing boundaries. It’s not entirely surprising that these streaks of rebellion exist among our student community but it has certainly been a pleasure putting these pieces together. We hope this semester’s issue will be equally enjoyable for our readers. Other than that, we hope to accomplish our goal of putting these voices out into a larger domain, where they can be heard and perhaps provoke new thoughts and incite fiery discussions.

Moreover, who knows what else these individual sparks can amount to?

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A WRITER'S BLOCK

The canvas lies empty, barren like the inside of my head
The pen jiggles nervously, itching to materialise the words unsaid;
Here I sit with my empty and hollow thoughts,
Feeling as though they are somehow tangled in-a-knot.

I struggle to find an inspiration
Anything to make a life's creation;
Instead I just scatter my thoughts even more,
Like marbles falling on the floor.

I clasp fistfuls of my hair out of desperation
And will the words to pour through my imagination;
Free, continuous and untethered,
Searching for the part of me kept hidden and treasured.

Maybe, I should go out and clear my head
Maybe, I'll get inspired by nature instead;
But I realize it's just a mere excuse,
Given by someone who can't find their inner muse.

I feel annoyed at the lack of innovation
And at my silent submission to resignation;
I write, I read, I tear and I dump,
A process I repeat until my fingers are numb.

Slowly, my gaze lands on the mess I've made
The floor, wrinkly and white, covered with my own fictitious parade;
I decide to try harder as I close my eyes,
Gradually giving shape to the feelings stripping of disguise.

This time my grip on the pen is firmer
My hands are less shakier
As I start sewing all those crumpled up sheets into one,
And maybe this time around, it won't be left undone.

Dipannita Mukherjee
Second Year

ATHEIST

I'm an atheist
So they say.
I question his existence,
To whom they pray.
I don't bend in mosque,
Nor do I bow in church.
I'm a stranger in the house
Where they kneel in his search.
Of the sacred chants,
They sing every day,
It's nothing but a babble,
Keeping their logic at bay.
I am devoid of religion,
And they call me hollow.
Bloodshed in his name,
Is that what they follow?
I believe what I see,
They see what they believe.
The truth is one and the same,
Just twisted by how we perceive.
Like they need faith,
I need reason.
It's not a betrayal to their God,
It's not treason.
My choice it is,
And their faith cannot amend
The things that my mind,
Refuses to comprehend.
So don't hate and don't judge
With your scornful eyes that oversee,
I am what I am,
It's what 'your' God made me.
I can be happy,
I can have peace.
But don't force onto me,
What I don't believe.
I am an atheist,
And so shall I be.
Let me question his existence,
Whom I cannot see.

Anu Priya
Second Year

A FULL CIRCLE

Around every thirty years they say,
Or thirty pulses, in a sequential order
A reason is born, as hundreds die
But a reason without cause, like a treeless leaf.
Outside, the decibels soar as they reach
Heights or depths. Little orphan pebbles
Are kicked and buried, in the sands or do they
Evaporate? Silently with ripples.
Vinegar-smelling little streets with names like
Wounds or mother or a coin near a well,
With buildings like sharks that bite into
A rabid myth, posing as a battle's memory.
Tirelessly the windless night twirls
The lap of a chalk line that separates
Flying and crawling, being and becoming
Hunting and dying, painting and escaping.
Another hundred years would unveil
The reason to walk a road that comes
Full circle, like a hollow tree trunk with
A vacuum within, and a war outside.

Ishita Krishna
First Year

SERENDIPITY OF A SINGLE MOTHER

But darling,
Put on a smile
for I'm here.
You've been so brave
and now you're ready.
For I was once
where you are now,
fighting a battle
and knowing not which way to go
with you in my arms.
Your toothless smile,
the flutter of your heart,
the flush of your cheeks,
your huge dark eyes, and their deep curiosity
were the things that strengthened my soul.
You are a part of me,
a fragment of my soul,
ready now to have
a part of your own.
My dear, don't let the pain
overpower your spirit.
Don't be afraid of the change,
As you experience heightened emotions.
You would want to let go
and turn your face away.
But remember, I didn't give-up on you.
You were once in the place, your child is in now.
I saw the better
and I wish you to see the same.
My love, you've been my saviour
and now, you have to choose yours.

Abeen Bilal
Second Year

RARE GIRL

You rare girl
Yet to tune into this orb
Your mind and soul refusing to believe
your feet were meant to walk this sphere.
You sit there, silently
conjuring up means to make them suppose
you are of their own kind.
You rare girl
Your head swarms with words you never utter.
You love to believe all things can be
as brilliant as a story ending.
You rare girl
The stars orient only for you;
a stellar being, they know the truth.
The alien body you detest and subdue.
You rare girl
Where do you belong?
In the verse of a slick love-song,
in the rights that have been made wrong.
You try so hard to trust the human race,
but the dots rarely connect;
and so you struggle to redirect
those exquisite thoughts in your head.
You rare girl
You're divergent to the common world.
You constantly seek the place you fit in.
A piece of the puzzle, always missing
as you stand alone, kissing the stars,
For they, in the dark, speak your language,
they mourn your agony of living in a place where
your aspirations—never relinquished.
You rare girl
you must, must know:

Your rarity does not go unknown;
you are a spark within the very souls
you affirm to have never ever known.
You are a gift to this planet,
a still spirit among the constant manic.
Your heart, however fragile, is pure.
Your mind, thoughts, a constant ember to burn.
Your soul, an answer to the greatest unknown.
What is it about you?
That makes my heart undo,
untangle the strings of a lifeless hue.
Maybe your eyes, so piercing, blue.
Maybe your palm, held in mine
so firm yet so kind.
Maybe your mind, an undying mystery
Is what always draws me back to you.
Or is it your little heart?
Guarded as safely as mine.
Is it the feat I'm after, or the usuality of our kind?
I believe it's your scars
Well-concealed, dark
Hiding in fear of judgement of your marks.
But they call-out, call-out to me
they beseech to be set-free
to be named and understood
they seek to reveal all for which they stood.
Your scars speak to me internally
a fine similarity
to all the skin tissues
I have also torn through.

Anjali Malik
Third Year

POETRY THOU ART NO SAVIOUR

Poetry, you're the excuse of my lone hours,
When the heart is emptied of all earthly preoccupations,
And seeks an escape route,
It is then, that stray words and verses come rushing in.
I, adrift in that turbulent gush,
Pen down those frenzied words,
Knowing not what they are, or how they come to be.
I have incubated them long enough,
And now, they wail for release,
Yet, what is their purpose? They don't heal the pain,
Nor do they bring you to me.
I am fine without you, well, just about fine,
Why do you chase me thus,
And defile my virgin thoughts with words?
Words that have been devised,
By languages that belong to men,
My thoughts are not literate,
They are ignorant, and ignorance, they say, is bliss.
Poetry, come not between me and my reveries,
Which have no syntax, no rhyme, no structure,
You demand propriety and rhythm.
You arise from the womb of silence,
And paint alien words in my diary,
Cries from the hollow of my heart,
Take the shape of beautiful lines.
Words of love, life, wisdom and folly,
Words that contain but little truth in them,
You're the delusion that I knowingly nurture,
You're the lie I live everyday, every moment.
For, you are nothing but a glimpse,
Of all that my heart desires but cannot have.
Poetry be not proud, you are not the garb of greatness,
Think not you comfort any anguished soul,
You only drug them, and put them in a trance.
The warm wetness that trickles down my cheeks?
You're just its product, not its cure,
You can't sweeten the sharp acidic taste,
That burns my throat,
Neither can you resolve the strife that sears my heart.
You can fill my vacant hours, but not the void within,
And one day you shall be dead and done with,
And all that will remain,
Will be the faint murmur of the ceiling fan,
And the muffled sobs...

Debangana Sen
Second Year

WHY INDIA NEEDS FEMINISM

“You can’t wear shorts to the market. Wear full-pants.”

“But why? It’s really hot outside!”

“People will stare. Do what you’re told.”

In Indian culture, girls have always been taught to cover themselves up, to not show too much skin and to always be cautious about attracting unwanted attention.

I remember my own mother telling me at a very young age to keep my arms folded in front of my chest because I might get groped. I was eleven then.

I find it quite peculiar how most of us have silently accepted this way of life and we keep on living under this cloud of fear. We make rules and restrictions for girls and expect them to be blindly obeyed because it’s for “their own good”.

- We expect you to be back by 6 pm
- Take your brother along with you
- What a pretty salwar! Now take a dupatta and cover yourself
- Don’t cut/colour your hair, no one will marry you

We are judged, labelled and constantly scrutinised by everyone around us. We are expected to be both traditional and modern, stylish but not “slutty”, “sanskaari” but not “gavaar”.

“Look at those shorts she’s wearing! She looks like a slut.”

“Look at that churidar she’s wearing! She looks like a behenji.”

It’s never good enough, is it?

When I started reading articles about feminism and gender equality it really intrigued me because I hadn’t seen much of it in my society. Cases of domestic abuse, eve-teasing, rape were the only ones that seemed to make the headlines in this country. Sounds odd?

So I took it upon myself to make the people around me think about this issue. When I turned sixteen, I felt like I had enough courage in me to voice my opinions. I started with my grandmother, who as a product of this society, had a very stereotypical image of the “role of a woman”. She kept telling me not to be so modern and radical, to give more importance to the family than the career in the future. She didn’t realise that what she thought-of as

wise grandmotherly advice, actually held the ability to destroy someone's dreams. That thought had the power to take away somebody's freedom. I questioned her, "Why not? I'm my own person, aren't I?" This threw her off a bit as I'd never argued with her before. I could see her start to think of ways to defend her stance. Years and years of convention slowly started churning in her head. They came out of her mouth, ready to devour hopes of young minds. I was lucky, I had already armoured myself against it. Those words didn't deter my spirits and I was able to show a different perspective. Sixteen-year-old me was proud of what I had done that day.

I'm eighteen now and not much has changed. I see women still getting harassed on the streets. Some still looking at themselves through the eyes of a man, trying to change themselves to fit their unrealistic standards. Still fighting to be happy and feel safe in their own country.

Why is it so hard for us to treat people, regardless of their gender, with the basic respect that everyone deserves?

Do not protect us. Do not worship us. Do not categorise us. We do not have to fit into your "type-of-woman".

An entire universe lies within us. We are not just the sum-total of our clothes, bags and make-up.

So yes, we need feminism.

We need feminism because somewhere in a crowd, a mother has wrapped her arms around her young daughter to protect her childhood.

We need feminism because every year a sister has been tying a thread on her brother's wrist entrusting him with her safety. We need feminism because saying, "She was out after eight p.m. wearing shorts, no wonder she got raped" is outright disgusting.

Dipannita Mukherjee
First Year

TO ACCEPT IS TO LOVE

Love is magical. Magical enough to turn your entire world upside down. The very nature of love allows you to go out of your way and do things for your loved one, be it an object or a person. Love can be passionate yet asexual, or it can be sexual and less passionate. I hate to classify the latter as lust. In fact, I hate to classify anything at all. Why is it always necessary to have definitions, boundaries and certain limited perceptions of various things? Why can we not rejoice in the fluidity of concepts and yet be sure of the constant assurance that lingers around.

I don't understand though, why all of my thoughts have to revolve around love. I guess love is the constant. The sad part, however, is that this love which is supposed to be everlasting in its very nature, ceases to exist once 'normative behaviour' does too. Love cannot always be reciprocated hence sometimes the least that can be expected out of the 'loving human race' is acceptance. Acceptance of what is different, of something that society doesn't approve of as a 'norm'. Acceptance of the 'kind', 'type' or 'category' that you are not and cannot relate to. Acceptance of the things that are not even remotely normal for you but are the very sources of a meaningful existence for others, the very things that they're holding on to. Judging is acceptable, so long as you judge for your own survival, but not when you are hampering someone else's life. To accept is the least one can do. To accept is to love.

Sagarika Chakraborty
Second Year

WHY WRITE?

“Writing is so boring. You should rather watch T.V. Why write?”

“Writing is not a career. When will you start thinking rationally? Why write?”

“Writers don’t earn much. Then why write?”

I write to express. Because I know that people haven’t always been there for me, but a blank paper and a pen have; because writing is my only escape. Every day I have to fight to be myself. I want to break these unbreakable barriers and walk over to the side, where the grass is greener. So I write.

Because I have always been lonely. Even when I am sitting in a room full of people, I feel lost. —Because I am not one of those cool kids, and I don’t fit in. Writing about my pain and crying over the pages is the only thing that keeps me sane.

So I write.

Because when I fell in love for the first time, I wanted to scream at the top of my lungs and let the world know that I was finally happy. But no one seemed to care.

So I write.

Because sometimes I feel like I can drown in my own tears. Sometimes I feel so happy, that I can die laughing. But it sounds absurd when I say it out loud.

So I write.

Because people laugh at me when I tell them: I want to change the world. Nobody takes me seriously. They think that I am going through a phase, and that I will get over it someday. But I want to prove them wrong, so I write.

I feel, that by writing it down, I have saved that memory for eternity. I just have to go back a few pages, to live that moment again. Because I want to remember the bad memories, just as much as I want to remember the good ones. Because I will always want to remember how hellish my first three months of college were, and how happy I was when I finally started to fit in. So I write.

Because unfortunately I wasn’t born in a fairytale. I never got my letter to Hogwarts, I never found the golden ticket to Willy Wonka’s Chocolate factory, I never found Aladdin’s lamp. But I wanted to be a part of those worlds. So I write.

Because I don’t care if I am rich or famous, I will not participate in the rat race. Because I refuse to let others define success for me. I just want to be happy and define success on my own terms. So I write.

Do I have what it takes to be a writer? I don’t know. I only know that I am moving in that direction. Step by step, I am progressing. I am not perfect today, but I will be someday. I can’t even imagine living a life where I would be happy doing anything else. The mere thought of not being able to ink the pattern of my existence on paper, is enough to send me into convulsions.

And so I write.

Vidhipssa Mohan
Second Year

FIFTY SHADES OF ABUSE

Fifty Shades of Grey is a phenomenon. It has broken all past records and is now in a league of its own. It started out as fan-fiction for *Twilight*, and was named Master of the Universe (how apt) initially. On the surface it seems like a dark fairytale romance, with a tortured Prince Charming and a naive, sweet maiden who is to be his redemption. However one only has to read it once, to realize how whacked up the book really is. The “love story” is more concerned about Christian Grey’s obsession with getting Anna to sign the contract which would begin their BDSM relationship than their actual romance. Christian Grey is “hot”, a fact which is reiterated by Anna and the book to the point of absurdity; I am not even going to count the number of times Christian is being an absolutely abusive tyrant, and all that Anna can think of is, “shit! He is so hot!” Mr. Grey is a mascot of the materialistic and consumer-driven society, which tells you that spending extravagantly on your partner is the perfect way to show that you love them. First-edition books, a new Audi, laptop, what not! Grey is rich, he is “hot”, and he fits the definition of a troubled man with strong mental-issues, what else can a woman possibly want? So what if he is obsessive and controlling and would probably have a restraining order on him if he were a real figure! He is “hot” and he is rich, it absolves him of all blame, because *insert flustered Anna* “Holy crap! He is hot!”

The novel brings about a wide spectrum of emotions in the reader. Mine ranged from mild disdain to absolute disgust. Ignoring the extremely poorly worded novel, I was appalled by the character of Anastasia Steele. She is naive (dumb), a complete pushover, and has frankly no concept of self-preservation or dignity. She stays with a man who stalks her, controls her, threatens her with sex, confesses he likes “fucking” brunettes because they remind him of his mom, and writes “laters baby” at the end of his messages. Grey even decides what kind of birth control Anastasia will take, people she will meet, he buys the company where she is working (supposedly to protect her) and has her followed. Grey repeatedly threatens Anastasia with sex or reminds her that she can never escape from him,

“Alaska is very cold and no place to run. I would find you. I can track your phone -remember?” (James 207).

He reminds her very frequently that she is under his power and he is not a patient man, he ignores Anastasia when she asks him to stop during intercourse, but rather threatens her that if she does not stop struggling, he would tie her feet and if she makes any more noise, he would gag her. She is scared of him of making him angry or displeasing him because he threatens her with sexual retribution whenever they disagree.

Cris Sullivan who deals with gender-based violence has written how Anastasia Steele stays with Christian Grey not because she enjoys it but rather because she is trying to keep the man. She ends up accepting his abusive and forceful sexual activities, and what begins with terror and lack of consent turns into enjoyment. This idea falls directly in line with rape-culture, a phenomenon that legitimizes sexual violence against women, by perpetuating the idea that they desire wanton sex, and that they exist for the sole-purpose of pleasing men.

Anastasia is a twenty-one year old virgin with no sexual experience; however, she is soon plunged into an intense sexual relationship with Grey and is forbidden to talk to her friends or family about it. Christian succeeds in isolating her completely, because of the non-disclosure contract she has no one to turn to, except him. Later in the book when her best friend Kate tries to warn her about him, she refuses to listen to her, because apparently Kate doesn't understand Christian the way she does.

“This man, whom I once thought of as a romantic hero, a brave shining white knight—or the dark knight as he said. He’s not a hero; he’s a man with serious, deep emotional flaws, and he’s dragging me into the dark. Can I not guide him into the light?” (James 249).

This then, becomes a narrative about a demented man, who finds happiness only because there is a woman willing to put-up with his abuse. This sends a very problematic message to women who are already in abusive relationships, telling them that they can fix controlling and abusive men by being obedient and devoted to them, and somehow it is all a part of love. Anastasia gets angry after each instance of abusive, controlling behaviour, but that never lasts. She chooses to sacrifice her dignity and self-respect for the opportunity to be loved by her “dark knight”. She is portrayed as being independent because she “defies” Christian by having very reasonable expectations and boundaries, however he time and again chooses to disregard her wishes. The depiction of BDSM in the novel has been criticized by the BDSM community itself, as being an unrealistic depiction of the same. BDSM requires both participants to make informed and independent decisions, something which Anastasia is incapable of making, because of her inexperience and her proximity to Grey who pressurizes and overwhelms her. According to Emma Green, the problem with Fifty Shades series is that it casually associates hot-sex with violence, but does not take into consideration any of the above. Sometimes, Anastasia says yes to sex she’s uncomfortable with, because she’s too shy to speak her mind, or because she’s afraid of losing Christian; she gives consent when he wants to inflict pain, yet she doesn’t feel comfortable with it. Amy Bonomi writes about how Fifty Shades seems to sanction abuse by portraying pain and humiliation as something erotic and feeding the idea that girls want a guy who controls, intimidates and threatens her.

The relationship between Christian and Anastasia is warped at best. Christian is more suited to be a part of “Scream” or “Friday the 13th” than be a part of a love-story. Or perhaps Grey is even more dangerous than Jason Voorhees, who is openly feared and abhorred. Grey in his “shit! he is so hot!” packaging is loved and admired. You can defend Christian Grey, saying that he has had a horrible childhood and he loves Anna. But the truth is that his victimhood does not legitimize abuse, and love is not tyranny. However, if you still love him and wish to meet him, I am told he is attending therapy with his old friends Rochester and Heathcliff, who are esteemed members of the organization “Stalkers ‘R’ Us”.

Sukriti Pandey
Second Year

THE TESTAMENT

In the stillness of the night, a single candle stood flickering on the table, with a parchment at its side. The candle burned slowly, its wax collecting on the table-top, a few drops of it falling at the end of the parchment, blissfully unaware of the tedious passage of time....

I woke up with a start, beads of perspiration glistening on my forehead and I anxiously waited for my eyes to accommodate to the darkness. Relief coursed through my veins as I witnessed her peaceful form sleeping. I stretched forth my hands to feel her heaving bare back to make sure of her presence. If only I could relive all of those moments, the first meeting, Ananya's "come hail or high water attitude", her million-dollar smile, her decisive mind, her persuasive look that makes my heart melt, the hurried, hesitant first-kiss that I stole from her on a rainy-day in an inconspicuous shack...

I sat-up in bed looking straight into the wall in front of me. It is so much easier to break down obstacles that physically prevent you from reaching your aim than having shackles that mentally hold you back. The calmness of the night did not comfort me, instead the eerie silence unsettled my mind as though it was forcing me to set my focus to the very things I was trying to shake-off.

I slid off the bed, put on my tracks and made my way to the other room for a glass of water. It seemed to be a little after midnight. Various questions, possibilities perhaps even wishful thinking played their way into my imagination which I consciously put-a-stop-to after a luxurious moment of fancy. As I started heading back, I noticed the candle along with the letter, sitting on the table, its grim, sprawling handwriting looking back at me as if it was an old wise man preaching to the-world-of-tribbles, only he could foretell...

Now I take-up the letter again slowly, unwillingly as though it would vanish into thin air if I gave it enough time. A humourless smile came to my lips as I considered the idea of casting the letter to the winds. Yes, perhaps I could destroy the letter and as liberating as it would be, it wouldn't change the contents of the letter, nor would it change the thinking behind it. It had to be done tonight. The decision had to be made. I lit a cigarette from the pack and after taking a long puff, sat down to execute the task at hand.

"My dearest,

I remember when you were a small child, you always wanted to go out to the most concealed spaces and sit there trying to bang music out of anything that was available. Today, those times have paid off. Your dedication at the music school has opened up many avenues for you..."

Music School. That was where I had met her. She was falling over one of the student's instruments. God, she always knew how to make an entrance. Those jet-black locks falling over her eyes that she continually tucked behind her ears with her finger. Her expressive eyes immediately captivated me and I stood there listening to her enthusiastic self, not knowing what to say.

"...Your Ma and I have so many dreams for you. Remember when you sat in the swing tied from that Banyan tree? You would stand on the swing and laugh your lungs out until you saw your ma's mehendi covered hands and ran off to her. I never quite understood your obsession with its aroma..."

A memory from the night before flashes across my mind. Your beautiful mehendi adorned fingers tracing the nape of your neck...you standing with your back towards me. I go over to you and put my arms around that irresistible curve of your waist while planting a soft kiss on your shoulder. I wish I could forever rest my chin there and cast my worries into the oblivion.

“..With every passing day you are moving closer to your dream but your recklessness is pulling you away from it. Don't throw away your life over decisions that you will regret later on. You need to make your mark on the world and for that you need capital. My millions of dollars, all my property and all my estates, they all belong to you. For the sake of all those memories we spent together, think it over, I will bequeath all my wealth in your name and you know just how much a struggling artist needs it. You will have my support at every step. All you have to do is forsake this futile whim of yours. You have until tomorrow. All this could be yours if only you would...”

If. That was the word that hung in the balance. That is the ultimatum my father had given me. Even in his death he had not relinquished the hold he had had on me, fighting to dictate my actions with the last remnant of agency that he had. I had not seen him in the past five years. The differences were becoming too much to bear and I had to leave. I had presumed that matters would get better with time but my father clung to his obstinacy and I refused to choose.

But now, the vulnerability of my position disturbs my mind. My last vestige of hope died with his refusal to understand my love for her. Since the day he turned down the look of utter supplication on my face, I knew that the events would lead to a moment like this when I would have to set my priorities straight. I smiled at the very ironic choice of words. I needed the financial back-up but more than that I needed someone to stand by me and be ready to go with me through it all. Something that despite all his power, he had not been able to give me ever since I confessed to him. Confessed? No, not confessed. When I revealed my love for Ananya to him.

He failed to understand that my love for Ananya was not a flight of fancy or a reckless decision nursed as a hobby. I cherish the memories I have had with my family but now she is the one who can hold my hand as I take my precarious steps into the world of music. We can be each other's pillar of strength and pave the way for our futures in accompaniment. But if I stay with her I lose my father's property and possibly get a reputation that, in India, will be difficult to overrule.

I look at the candle, it is almost finished, about to become level with the table...

I look across to the bed where Ananya rests calmly. A gentle breeze plays wistfully at her black hair...her sleepy eyes open lazily and as they focus on mine she gives that million-dollar smile. Those deep pools of mystery captivate me yet again but just then a golden ray hits me in the eye reflecting off a crystal in the room. The dawn has arrived and just before the candle burns out I can swear I see the flicker going steady.

Difficult to overrule yes. But not impossible.

I make up mind regarding the problem that I was pondering over the previous night. It was then that I realised that it was never really a choice: one was a luxury and the other, a necessity. I then smiled at Ananya who had woken up and was getting the breakfast table ready, and before I left to help her, I scribbled down a letter to the lawyer in my firm hand.

Respected Mr. Gupta,

I have come to understand through my father's letter, that you are the lawyer whom I am to inform of my decision. I have resolved to continue my life with my partner Ananya Kashyap. I am aware of the financial implications of this decision and wish to reassure you that, given time, wealth might knock twice at your door, but love doesn't.

Thank you.

Yours sincerely,

Reshma Upadhyay
(Daughter of Mr. Kailash Upadhyay)

Oindrila Gupta
Second Year

BOOK REVIEW- CHANDER PAHAR

Mountain of The Moon or as its Bengali title goes, ChanderPahar (1937) by Bibhuti bhushan Bandopadhyay is translated in English by Santanu Sinha Chaudhari.

“Oh! What a dream! Do early morning dreams really come true? Many people say so!”

The storyline revolves around the desire to dream and to make them come true. Travelling is about experience and doing the unknown and undone in life, which is what the protagonist of this story does.

Living in a small village of Calcutta, Shankar is a young boy who dared to dream about unleashing the unknowns of his life. His heart wanted to fly to far-away places and wanted to explore hundreds of daring adventures. With love for travelling and a vast knowledge of geography, this young man travels to the jungles of Africa with a plan to find the caves of exquisite yellow-diamonds.

One day, out-of-the-blue he received a golden letter of opportunity. A letter with which, he could sail to Mombassa- from where the adventure begins!

In Mombassa, Shankar encounters not only the dangers of facing the great African lion and Black Mamba-snake but also the myth of Dingonek (the Rhodesian monster) and the Bunyip that is said to live in the forest of Zuzuland even today, a deadly beast whose tales are still alive and generate fear in the hearts of the natives.

The fear of the unknown is the greatest fear and to face it, one needs to have courage and determination. It is a story of survival amidst the constant fear of the unknown and of the deadly beasts of Central Africa.

Mountain of The Moon is a breathtaking novel with extensive insight from a writer who has never even crossed the borders of India.

A must read for those who dare to dare, dare to dream, explore and discover.

Disha Ghosh
Second Year

PRINCESS: A TRUE STORY OF LIFE BEHIND THE VEIL IN SAUDI ARABIA (THE PRINCESS TRILOGY-1)

Princess (Book -1 from The Princess Trilogy) by Jean Sasson is a story about Sultana (pseudonym, as she could not let her true-identity be known) a princess in the royal and fabulously wealthy House of Al Saud, Saudi Arabia. Published in 1992, Sultana remained incognito while she provided author Jean Sasson with the intimate details of her life.

The book reveals shocking and dreadful incidents in vivid details. One minute, she is talking casually about her everyday schedule, the other, she is sharing her experience of female genital mutilation. The narrative of this story flows very naturally, chronicling Sultana's growth from a helpless child to a brave, experienced and strong woman. She is willing to fight everyone in order to keep her children safe. Sultana talks about every aspect of her life which ranges from her early marriage, to the story of a friend who was tied to a chair and thrown in a pool for befriending foreigners. The novel makes you realize how fragile life can be for some people. It reveals the horrifying story of how a teenage girl was publicly executed on the false charge of seducing her brother's friends.

My mind was in a state of disbelief while reading the novel. I kept on thinking that maybe what I was reading was mere fiction, and Sultana didn't exist after all, that it was all just the fruit of someone's imagination. Towards the end of the book, when Sultana runs away to France with her kids, I felt an overwhelming sense of relief. But then, I realized that Sultana could do it because she belonged to a royal family. I could only imagine the plight of the innocent women who live in such a society, which is defined by its misogyny and patriarchy. Not every Sultana meets a Jean Sasson to narrate her story.

This is a beautifully written novel that will grip you for hours at-a-stretch, though I also believe that a beautiful country like Saudi Arabia should have been given a little more attention. This book is not an easy read and will leave you with a lot to think about. Nevertheless I would say—if you're not faint hearted— do give this book a shot!

Sakshi Shrivastava
Second Year

WHERE DOES ERIKA BELONG? : THE QUESTION OF SADOMASOCHISM AND AGENCY IN MICHAEL HANEKE'S *THE PIANO TEACHER*

Michael Haneke's *The Piano Teacher* has been at the centre of many controversies since its release due to its addressing of the question of sadomasochism. An adaptation of Elfriede Jelinek's 1983 novel by the same title, at the centre of its action lies the story of a forty-year old professor at a Viennese music academy Erika Kohut (Isabelle Huppert), who meets a young charming student Walter (Benoit Magimel), who soon confesses his love for her. Walter is soon confronted with Erika's sadomasochistic desires and is asked by Erika to comply to them. Their relationship thus becomes a power game wherein Erika aspires to control the sexual relationship by being abused by Walter. Some critics often assume Erika's role as an empowered one in that she is acceptable of her deviant sexual nature. But a deeper scrutiny of Erika's life reveals her to be a victim of her circumstances and one with barely any agency. It is under the light of this statement that this paper proposes to examine how Erika's initial seemingly bold, assertive acts only turn out to be her escape from her otherwise claustrophobic life. In the end she only stands out as a deviant alone in the face of the world which refuses to accept a behavior which is not "normal".

Before one initiates an enquiry into the question of agency in Erika's life, a peek into the concept of sexual masochism is necessary. Sexual Masochism refers to engaging in or frequently fantasizing about being beaten, bound, or otherwise made to suffer, resulting in sexual satisfaction. It may also mean to challenge oneself and one's reactions to extreme situations. Being able to trust your partner with your body. But this happens to be a behaviour that the "normal" society frowns upon. Film critics have examined the character of Erika closely. Accordingly, Roger Ebert in a review of the film contends that Erika "is not simply an adventuress, a sexual experimenter, a risk taker. Some buried pathology is at work" (Ebert). The film doesn't seem to accept Erika's behaviour as just another form of sexual behaviour but presents it as a perversion. Erika's sexual inclination when seen as a statement of autonomous female sexuality can also be seen as what is conventionally associated with masculinity and is thus threatening to the "normal" society with its rigid gender norms. The film thus subscribes to the prescribed rules of sexual behaviour and instead of presenting Erika as an empowered character with deviant sexuality, seems to portray her as a victim of her circumstances who tries to escape her situation through various defense mechanisms that she has created. Moreover, her desire remains unfulfilled, thus leaving her alone at the end with no one to understand her.

The expression of Erika's loss of agency is best manifested in Erika's life at home since every aspect of her life there is governed by her mother. They share a claustrophobic apartment with twin-beds. Furthermore, there seems to be no law or limit regulating the mother's possession of the child. Erika's mother continues to invade her personal space with no access to any privacy, dignity or any external interests. Her mother is constantly keeping a check on her. The apartment which they share also seems to be mirroring the claustrophobic relationship that Erika has with her mother. Observing the same, Nina Hutchinson holds that their apartment "is a kind of mini-necropolis where they sleep side-by-side in twin single beds, wreak negativity and resentment on each other incessantly". Thus, Erika's relationship with her mother oscillates wildly between intense outbursts of physical anger, guilty reconciliation and sexual longing (Hutchinson).

Consequently, the constant nagging by the mother brings in the physically abusive output in Erika's life. According to John Champagne, Erika's mother appears to represent the (phallic) "Lacanian pre-Oedipal mother", who is both adored and feared by the child because of the child's dependence on her and its closeness to her body (Champagne). She is seen as phallic, given that Erika's father is physically absent from the film entirely. Erika's mother uses "love" as her main weapon. The greatest threat to her control is sex. She is seen as phallic, given that Erika's father is physically absent from the film entirely. Erika's mother uses "love" as her main weapon. The greatest threat to her control is sex. The mother fears being left alone if Erika finds a lover. She thus fills in feelings of guilt into Erika, sabotaging any attempts to form relationships. Moreover she is made to feel like a "dirty whore" by her mother in any of her attempts to be feminine in anyway. Thus even the closest relationship that Erika has doesn't give her any space or the right to exercise any agency.

The effect of such an atmosphere is clearly mirrored in Erika's actions. Erika seems to be suffering from some forms of breakdown. She is inclined towards pornography, goes to watch it in all-male video booths. Not only this, she even collects discarded semen-filled tissues from these hardcore video cabins. Furthermore, she mutilates her genitals in the bathroom. She also spies on copulating couples at movie drive-ins. Thus her stiff and repressed exterior is counterbalanced by her solitary excursions to porn shops and genital mutilation. She seeks the rules of sexuality that she cannot deny and resorts to pornography. Thus creating her own set of rules with a blend of pornography and her own logic and desire.

The daughter thus invents excuses to escape the mother's gaze and to carve out a private space where she can "appropriate the role of the voyeur" as opposed to the watched space she otherwise inhabits at her home (Reineck). According to Alex Reineck, "her emotions and drives are expressed through an intellectual framework. This framework is composed of the defenses she has had to create to deal with her life up to this point" (Reineck). Nevertheless, her acting as a voyeur and her position in an all-male porn shop does give her gaze and through this she also tries to evade being an object. In this manner, Elaine V. Siegel contends that "Erika herself functions as a prostitute on the animated screen, where she is placed in front of our eyes and is supposed to give us visual pleasure". The audience watches the image as well as the object of their gaze watches an image without having the object watch us (Siegel). Erika thus becomes the subject and the object of our gaze. Thus the only real sex is violent and the blame is put on Erika's deviant nature. Erika again remains without any agency.

Jean Wyatt in his analysis of the movie uses Jacques Lacan's concept of desire. Lacan's contention is that desire is created by the lack that finds the subject as a member of the social/symbolic order. It propels the individual into a search to fill that lack. Erika's search takes her to her fantasies. She seems to be addicted to her fantastical structure of sexual encounter. Her sexuality is imagined, which is evident when Walter suggests sex. Her sexuality here shifts from a private, abstract sphere into a very real and physical one (Wyatt). Thus unleashing a train of monstrous events as Erika attempts to materialize her sadomasochistic desires. In accordance, before their third sexual encounter Erika makes Walter read the letter containing the rules. She wants him to use her sexually and therefore also maintaining the fantasy that she is being forced to do the things that she wants to do. She says, "I want you to squat over my face and then punch me in the gut, so that my tongue goes up your ass". Erika thus longs for someone to fulfill her desires again making her someone in need who has to ask other people to fulfill her desires.

Erika is sometimes also referred to as the "phallic woman" by critics like Peter Travers. But one must keep in mind that "phallic" does not necessarily connote empowerment, at least not in the case of Erika. Erika's desire to control is masculine but the enactment of her desire renders her as a passive figure during a sexual encounter.

She is seen to be in a constant need of dominating her sexual scene. The first sexual encounter between Erika and Walter is more or less an enactment of the power games between the top and the bottom wherein Erika wants to be at the bottom. Examining this spiral, Nina Hutchinson comments, "Erika orbits distorted extremes of feminine and masculine, action and repression" (Hutchinson). Her attempts to create a role-reversal eventually collapse her sense of self. She finds herself belonging nowhere. Even Walter's take on sex fails to satisfy her exacting standards, thus shattering her fantasy of associating pleasure with control.

Erika "surrenders" herself to Walter only. Unlike Erika, Walter has never had to have an intellectual framework to "explain" his desire. His desires are "natural" and being sexually attractive, he has never had to really think about the exacting standards. Walter doesn't understand that Erika's desires are rooted in her need to feel as though in control. Therefore Walter reacts with rejection and dismissal to the letter because it does not conform to his conception of love and romance. Later in the movie, Walter comes to their apartment drunk and rapes Erika. In the same manner, John Champagne holds, "The Piano Teacher is a film about the impossibility of female desire" (Champagne). All that he has been able to read in Erika's instructions is violence and thus violates her. But violence is not what Erika wants. She wants consensual loss of control by pretending victimhood. Not only does Erika's desire remain unfulfilled but she also suffers a rape, she again becomes a victim here and is left powerless.

When Walter violates Erika, she is no longer the dominating one but the one abused and powerless. Walter subdues and punishes through sexual violence the woman who cannot conform to his "normal" and traditional sexual desire. Thus, although Erika's letter with its masochistic content problematizes the roles of victim and perpetrator, the rape definitively asserts the dominance of male over the female as well as the hegemony of patriarchal society. Erika's stabbing at the end of the movie and walking away can also be read as her acceptance of her deviant nature and that she is alone in her venture which no one to comprehend her. This film then strategically does what Erika's mother and most of the world does in the face of "abnormal" behaviour: refuse to interact with it.

Thus, Erika's behaviour although seemingly seems to be challenging the cultural demands of femininity in that she is present in an all-male porn shop. At the end of the movie Erika stabs herself near the chest but doesn't die because she misses her heart. She thus leaves the foyer of the auditorium before her performance. Thus abandoning her role as a piano teacher she walks out alone into the street. This single most act of stabbing herself can also be read as Erika's final attempt to take agency over herself. Nevertheless patriarchal society renders female desire impossible. Moreover the movie presents sadomasochism as a perversion. No character in the film understands Erika's desire. Walter only reads violence in her desire and her mother terms her as a whore in any of her attempts to deviate from her conception of "normal". This positions her alone and without any agency, thus reinforcing stereotypes and social limitations on sexuality .

Anjali Joshi
Third Year

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